



if you should fall to pieces by everybreatheverymove

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Summary: (Canon rewrite where Mike is the one comforting El in the bathroom after the sauna test.) His eyes lower to her neck, to the reddening bruise that wraps around her throat; it's ugly and unflattering, a reminder of what can happen when her strength is matched. But she's been waiting for it, waiting for him to see it and see her. She wants him to tell her she's beautiful anyway.

if you should fall to pieces

"She wants to be alone."

The door to the small bathroom is open, only slightly, and Max's hand is still gripping the doorknob. She twists her wrist to the side, pulling the door close enough for El to have some privacy but not enough to shut her inside.

Last night had been a lot more eventful than any of them could have predicted — no amount of planning or foreseeing could have prepared them for what would happen. They hadn't planned for Billy to break free and overpower them, overpower El. They hadn't expected him to wrap his hands around her throat and choke her to the point of exhaustion, to weaken the strongest of them with just his hands and nothing but. They hadn't prepared makeshift weapons in advance this time, hadn't come up with a backup plan in case the first one failed; and it should have worked, should have been enough. But it wasn't.

Instead, El had almost died at the hands of a monster-made madman, Mike foolishly threw himself into the line of fire for her, and by some miracle they all escaped by the skin of their teeth because the very idea of someone or something hurting Mike seemed to be too much for the girl to bear, too much to keep her down for good.

Max sighs, her eyes lingering on the wooden door for just a moment longer. Then she starts towards the boys, heading straight for Lucas as she fingers the strap of her watch. He's sat on the couch with a handful of Frosted Flakes and a mouthful too. Will is in an old recliner by the door leading outside, the worn blue leather creaking as he shuffles around, eyes downcast as if he's lost in thought.

Mike is... Truthfully, she can't decide if he's calm or if he's been pacing around all morning and is finally worn out.

"How is she?" It's Lucas that asks, and out of the corner of his eye, Mike notices Will perk up; slight concern clear on his face as his hair flops into his eyes.

"I mean," Max starts, and she shrugs — as though it's obvious, as though it's not a big deal. "Same as last night." She tells him, "her neck is bruised as hell but,"

A few steps away from her, she can hear Mike muttering something beneath his breath, shaking his head as though her answer isn't good enough. And then he's walking away from the group and towards the small restroom in the corner of the basement, his basement.

"What is he doing?" Max whips around, arms folded over her chest as she watches Mike stalk toward the bathroom in long strides, "She said—"

"Max," is all Lucas says, an almost-warning look in his eye. Somehow, it's enough, and she understands then that maybe some things just go unspoken. Mike and El's relationship is one of them, apparently.

Across the room, Mike has his hand pressed against the door — it's surprisingly cool desperate the temperature outside and the static humidity that's been sweltering around the Wheeler home for days on end.

It leaves him breathless, lungs stuffed full of warm air and some kind of hope that maybe if he pushes the door open and slips inside, he'll find whatever he needs to calm his nerves and put his mind to rest.

Mike reaches for the doorknob with his other hand suddenly, and then he's entering the bathroom and closing it shut behind him.

El is stood by the sink, one hand gripping the porcelain bowl and the other fisting a ball of tissue. She doesn't turn to face him, doesn't say anything. She only looks in the mirror, her blemished reflection staring right back at him.

With a sigh, Mike presses up against the door, unmoving and quiet — as though some unseen force is keeping him there like she's holding him in place without so much as moving an inch. He holds still, holds her gaze in the mirror as he asks, "Are you okay?"

His voice isn't broken, but it's deeper than last night, and El thinks this might be the first time he's addressed her directly (about

something other than the 'plan') all day. When they'd returned home late last night, he'd simply ushered everyone inside and offered them all sleeping bags and an array of pillows. Lucas handed Max two sleeping bags, El avoided everyone's eye, and the girls had drifted off to sleep by the television before anyone could stop them.

"Yes," El finally says, breaking her silence with a soft voice. She drops her gaze down to the sink, raising the clump of bloody tissue to her face, her fingers tightening around the thin paper as she gently dabs at her top lip.

It takes him a moment of watching her, but then something in Mike snaps. He pushes up against the door, hands falling limp by his sides as he squeezes past the girl to reach the other side of the sink, carefully avoiding touching her — he's tempted to offer an apology when his thigh grazes her hip, bumping her side as he rounds her. He flicks open the toilet seat lid with a loud thump and reaches up to peer inside the small cabinet hanging above. He pulls a small, folded flannel from the top shelf with a lick of his lips as he turns back around to look at her.

El is still pressing the soaked tissue to her face, eyes glazing over as she zeroes in on her nose, brushing the cloth along her Cupid's bow. Slowly, Mike holds an empty hand out. El raises an eyebrow in curiosity, and her eyes drift up to his face. He purses his lips, and his eyes are focused solely on her mouth, brows pinched together as if in concentration.

She drops the used tissues into his hand, right corner of her mouth hitching up into a small smile when he blinks down at the mess and proceeds to toss it into the toilet. He doesn't flush it though, only whips around to take a step closer. Mike stretches across her to turn on the cold tap, and he holds the washcloth under the water flow for a few seconds; long enough to wet the cloth but not soak it.

"Can I?" He starts, and the rest of his question goes unspoken when El nods, giving him permission to take another step forward and crowd her space. He stops just short of a foot away from her, lifting his eyes to meet her own as he softly presses the cold towel to her cheek. "Is that okay?" Mike asks, watching as her eyes close, scrunch. "I can—"

"It's fine," El tells him. She shuffles forward ever so slightly, making it easier for him to help rinse her face of any leftover blood. When Mike runs the cloth along her top lip, two fingers stretched out to press the cotton to her skin, El dares a look up at him, cheeks flushing as a tickle starts over her lips. "Are you okay?"

Mike stills, and he drops his hand mid-air. "Me?" His eyebrows dart up to his hairline then, eyes blown wide and lips parted in surprise, "Yeah, I'm- I'm fine." He tells her, softly, and then he goes back to delicately trailing the washcloth over her face, rubbing gentle circles into her skin. "I'm sorry, by the way."

When El simply stares at him, button nose wrinkling in confusion, he continues with a sigh, "for not reacting sooner." Mike takes a breath, Adam's apple bobbing thickly, "I should've... I don't know, just *moved* quicker." He says, voice dipping at the end as he scrunches his eyes shut and shakes his head, "I just—"

"Mike," El tilts her head to the side then, and she reaches up to lay her hand over his, fingertips pressed to the spaces between his knuckles, pale skin pinkening. "It's fine." She attempts a smile, though it goes unnoticed, "*I'm* fine."

Whether Mike believes her or not, she isn't sure. But he seems to *accept* it because he reaches up to cup the other side of her face in his left hand and inch closer — not enough to kiss her, but just close enough for her to smell the citrus smell of his shampoo.

(It hasn't even been three days, but suddenly she misses the feel of his hair running through her fingers, threading and curling around her hands as she pulls him closer, the soft press of his lips flush against her own. It hasn't even been three days, but she misses him.)

(There had been an unmistakable softness in his embrace last night; lean arms wrapped around her body as he cradled her against his chest, letting the warmth of his body spread through her. He'd fallen with her, *for* her, let her hold onto him for dear life.)

(He didn't mind it when she collapsed into him, when he'd burdened himself with the weight of her emotions and borne her every feeling. He didn't mind it when she sobbed wet, hot tears, blood pouring

down her face and her nose running. He didn't mind it when she grabbed him, reaching for his face and pawing at his arms and legs for support, as if trying to find some part of him that would assure her he was safe. He didn't mind it when she found refuge there; tucked safely away in the comfort of his welcome arms.)

She watches as his eyes lower to her neck, to the reddening bruise that wraps around her throat; it's ugly and unflattering, a reminder of what can happen when her strength is matched. But she's been waiting for it, waiting for him to see it and see *her*.

(He hates it.)

(She wants him to tell her she's beautiful anyway.)

"I am sorry, you know," e says, a dejected look on his face now. "About the other day."

El doesn't say anything, can tell he's getting lost in his thoughts. She lets him; keep talking, keep staring at her neck — free hand gently sliding down the column of her throat to finger the bruise. It doesn't hurt when he touches it, doesn't do anything but send shivers running down her spine.

"I never should've lied to you. About anything." The boy thumbs the underside of her chin, tilting her head back slightly to inspect the mark, "It was stupid."

El grabs him by the wrist to pull his hand away then, lowering her head until she's looking up at him through her lashes. "It was."

"Exactly." He says, and a grin threatens to take over his face, for whatever reason — because she's seen the logic in his reasoning or because she seems to be on the brink forgiving him, he doesn't now. But he continues nonetheless, adding, "I should've apologized at the mall the other day," he says, shoulders moving as adds, "I know that, and I'm sorry. Okay?"

"Okay."

Mike frowns, "What?" he blinks, "You... you can't forgive me that easily." He reasons, flinching back all of a sudden as though she's just

scolded him. "I mean-

"You saved me, Mike," El reminds him, one brow raised sharply. "So... Yes. Okay."

"Well, yeah." His brows furrow and he drops their hand back down, eyes watching them sway. "Obviously." The corners of his mouth turn up then, forming a boyish grin, "You know, I meant what I said. Yesterday?" El gapes up at him, urging Mike to carry on. "About you... About you meaning everything to me."

El beams at that, and she bites against the inside of her cheek to stop herself from giggling, from full-on crashing into him with open arms. "Oh," she breathes out, chest heavy as she swallows. "That's... a lot." The girl says, almost plainly.

Mike smiles, lips stretching wide as a matching grin takes over her face.

(Whether all is forgiven or not, it hardly matters when she looks at him like *that*; like she could burn his whole world down to embers with nothing but a smile and he would let her. He'd hand her the matches.)

El closes her eyes in content as Mike reaches for her face again, pinched fingers holding the washcloth in place as he dabs it along the base of her nose.

(It reminds her of a simpler time. When they were twelve and slightly younger and nothing more than two strangers who happened to meet under a particularly odd set of circumstances. When he offered her shelter from the rain and opened up his heart, and she could do little else but offer him the same in return. When he protected her, and she saved him, and they spent a moment together not unlike this one.)

"Mike?" He hums in response, continues wiping the top of her lips with gentle fingers and soft flicks of his wrist, eyes darkening as she adds,

"I'm happy I'm home."